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ABSTRACT

Noting that our ability to incorporate the cultural strengths and the distinctive ways that families, specifically fathers, contribute to educational accomplishments of preschool children is severely constrained by major gaps and inadequacy in the research literature, this Digest explores what is known about the role of fathers in young children's academic achievement and early literacy. Among the research discussed is a critical review of research on father involvement in children's education and schooling that concluded that fathers' participation in literacy activities, the barriers that parents face as a result of low literacy, and their perceptions of the role that they can play in their children's literacy development may affect children's preparedness for school. The Digest discusses research that examines the extent to which fathers are involved with their children's schools, and points out that even when fathers have limited schooling, their involvement in children's schools and school lives is a powerful factor in children's academic achievement. The Digest also points out that children's development of early literacy begins at birth and relies on a range of environmental stimuli, and that fathers can ensure that their children are exposed to the best environmental stimuli by participating at home and in early childhood education settings. The Digest concludes with suggestions for ways that early childhood educators can introduce fathers to approaches that provide opportunities for children to scribble and write,

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learn new vocabulary, identify letters and important words such as their names, and utilize relevant print within and outside the household. (LPP)

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by

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Fathers' Role in Children's Academic Achievement and Early Literacy

Vivian Gadsden and Aisha Ray

Family involvement has been a key theme in early childhood education for more than three decades (Fantuzzo, Tighe, & Childs, 2000). However, because early childhood educators tend to engage more with mothers than with fathers, the study of fathers' involvement in children's development has been neglected. This Digest explores what is known about the role of fathers in young children's academic achievement and early literacy.

Fathers and Infants

Early research indicated that the earlier fathers became involved with their children's learning and socialization, the better. For example, Yarrow et al. (1984) observed 6- to 12-month-old infants separately with mothers and fathers at home and in a laboratory setting. They found that in 6-month-old infants, parental attention and sensory stimulation, especially of mothers, was associated with infant persistence. At 12 months of age, significant results were found only in relation to paternal stimulation and boys' persistence at practicing sensorimotor activities. Clarke-Stewart (1978) observed fathers, mothers, and children 15, 20, and 30 months of age, at home in unstructured and semi-structured situations. She found that the intellectual skills of 15- to 30-month-olds (as measured by the Bayley Mental Scale at 16 and 22 months, and the MCDI at 30 months) were significantly related to the fathers' engagement in unstructured play, fathers' positive rating of children, the amount fathers and children interacted, and fathers' aspirations for children's independence as measured on an age-expected questionnaire.

Early Literacy Development

In areas such as children's early reading, Gadsden and Bowman (1999), in a critical review of research on father involvement in children's education and schooling, conclude that fathers' participation in literacy activities, the barriers that parents face as a result of low literacy, and their perceptions of the role that they can play in their children's literacy development may affect children's preparedness for school. These factors also may influence the direct and subtle messages that fathers send to their children about the value, achievability, and power associated with literacy, schooling, and knowledge.

Although mothers' education historically has been used as the primary predictor of children's achievement, educational research increasingly is examining the effect of father-child interaction on children's early learning, particularly among fathers with low incomes (Gadsden, Brooks, & Jackson, 1997). In a study of 50 low-income African American fathers participating in fatherhood programs, Gadsden et al. examined fathers' beliefs regarding the valuing, uses, and problems of literacy learning for themselves and in relation to their children's early schooling. Fathers' accounts suggested that many fathers felt challenged by the expectations attached to parenting roles—a challenge that was exacerbated by their own limited formal literacy capacities and their desire to support their children's early literacy development. In addition, fathers' beliefs about their children's educational success and future possibilities were ambivalent, often contraindicated their practices, and sometimes were at odds with their self-perceptions of facilitating children's literacy achievement. The researchers remind us that low-income African American fathers are a diverse group, not only in their literacy abilities, literacy experiences, literacy preparation, and goals for their children, but also in their family relationships and family resources. These and other studies suggest that a father's ability to support his child's learning affects the child's engagement with books and schooling. Fathers (and mothers) who have limited schooling as well as low reading and writing abilities have difficulty participating in school-related activities requiring high levels of literacy. However, these parents have high hopes for their children and depend on programs to ensure that their children will become *competent learners*.

Research suggests that even when fathers have limited schooling, their involvement in children's schools and school lives is a powerful factor in children's academic achievement. Nord, Brimhall, and West (1997) analyzed data from the1996 National Household Education Survey (NHES) to compare the involvement of nonresident and married fathers in school activities of kindergarten to 12th-grade students. Married and nonresident fathers' involvement in four types of school activities during the school year were examined—attending a general school meeting, attending a class or school event, attending a parent-teacher conference, and volunteering. Involvement was defined as low if fathers did none or one of the four activities during the school year, moderate if they did two activities, and high if they did three or four activities. Fathers in two-parent families and nonresident fathers who were moderately or highly involved in their children's school had children who were significantly more likely than children with less involved fathers to receive mostly high marks, enjoy school, and never repeat a grade.

Research that examines the extent to which fathers are involved with their children's schools (e.g., Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997) has generally shown that fathers are less involved than mothers in all types of school activities. In particular, Nord, Brimhall, and West (1997) found that fathers with less than a high school education were much less likely to be involved in their children's schools than fathers with higher levels of education. Although nonresident fathers were found to be substantially less involved with their children's school than fathers residing with their children, Nord, Brimhall, and West (1997) indicated that the involvement of nonresidential fathers was in no way trivial. Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) examined whether the motivational resources (e.g., self-regulation, perceived competence, and control understanding) of 300 11- to 14-year-old children mediate between three types of paternal involvement (e.g., *behavior* with regard to school, the child's perception of the parent's *affective and personal availability*, and exposure of the child to *intellectual and cognitive activities*) and school performance (e.g., grades). They reported that for fathers two of the involvement factors (behavior and intellectual/cultural activities) both uniquely influenced perceived competence and indirectly influenced school performance. In a recent study of Head Start children, Fagan and Iglesias (1999) used a nonequivalent control group design to assess whether participation in a Head Start based father involvement intervention influenced child outcomes (e.g., early academic

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readiness in reading and mathematics, social skills, and problem behaviors). The intervention involved adapting traditional Head Start parent involvement activities (e.g., volunteering, weekly Fathers' Day programs, father sensitivity training with staff, monthly support groups for fathers, and father-child recreational activities). Three levels of father participation (e.g., low, adequate, and high) were measured. Fagan and Iglesias report a positive association between high-level participation in a father involvement project and change in children's mathematics readiness scores.

Early literacy development is a significant part of preparing children to achieve academically. Children's early literacy is one of the areas to show the most promise in engaging fathers. Although empirical studies in this area are few, the applied activities suggested in *Young Children* (e.g., Ortiz, Stile, & Brown, 1999) and other publications demonstrate how fathers can be invited to engage in basic literacy activities. Literacy researchers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998; Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Wasik & Bond, 2001) have identified a range of early literacy behaviors that are associated with children's engagement with texts and success in reading:

- Oral language development, which includes book reading
- Phonemic awareness activities
- Exposure to the alphabet

In more expansive definitions of literacy, a parent's engagement is not limited specifically to reading and writing but encompasses a range of cognitive and social learning. As we know, young children acquire phonemic awareness through nursery rhymes, jingles, poetry, and books that contain words with rhymes and alliteration. Book reading, one of the most important activities in providing a context for language development, is an essential component of an effective preschool curriculum (Senechal et al., 1998). It is intimately tied to language development, helps children to develop phonemic awareness and mastery of the concepts of print, and can be used to engage fathers with the program and at home.

How Fathers Can Be Involved

Children's development of early literacy begins at birth and relies on a range of environmental stimuli. Fathers can ensure that their children are exposed to the best environmental stimuli by participating at home and in early childhood education settings, which are often children's first significant experience outside of the family. In this way, fathers can be supported as they foster optimal early childhood experiences through which their children can develop cognitive abilities. For example, they can tell stories, read and select books with their children, and learn how to use appropriate visual and cognitive cues. Early childhood educators can introduce fathers to approaches that provide opportunities for children to scribble and write, learn new vocabulary, identify letters and important words such as their names, and utilize relevant print within and outside the household (e.g., the brand names on milk cartons and street signs). They can also encourage fathers to talk with their children, a critical but often under-rated parent-child activity.

This type of support could be integrated within the context of a program's family involvement practices or presented as a workshop that is followed up with activities involving both mothers and fathers. Parents might be asked to maintain a portfolio of their children's efforts—that is, a folder of the child's best work—which both child and parent choose. This activity requires that parents follow through on helping their children with literacy tasks, acknowledge their role in their children's learning, and maintain a relationship with the program. Fathers who do not live in the same household with their children can also use this activity as a tangible way to connect with them regularly around a shared activity of interest and demonstrate that they value literacy.

Parents who have low levels of English language and literacy skills can read aloud, recite rhymes, and sing songs to children in their home language. In these cases, early childhood educators can clarify how children's early literacy experiences in the home language support them as English-language learners. A father can describe what he is doing while engaging in household tasks and ask the child to predict what he might do next. Fathers might also create games that require reading, writing, and problem solving.

Conclusion

Our ability to incorporate the cultural strengths and the distinctive ways that families, specifically fathers, contribute to educational accomplishments of their preschool children is severely constrained by major gaps and inadequacy in our research literature. Before early childhood programs can tap these fathers' or families' potential to enhance children's development, research needs to define father and family involvement more precisely and to examine the culturally rich dimensions of children's early care and education experiences.

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